



Lenten Devotional

We hope you'll follow along daily, be deepened in your faith through this ministry of the Class of 2018, with additional contributions by student and alumnae/i leaders, and prepare your heart to celebrate at Easter the new life he made possible for all.

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2019

Michael Ondrick / President, PTS Student Association

SCRIPTURE

Jonah 3:1-4:11

3:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. 4:1 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6 The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 10 Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than

a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

DEVOTIONAL

Jonah just *knew* what would happen when he went to Nineveh, and so much did he dread his seemingly inevitable fate that he attempted to travel to the ends of the earth to escape God's plan for him. So too did the Romans know what would happen when they executed Jesus of Nazareth. This usurper, this so-called "King of the Jews"? Flogged, crucified, buried. So too did the chief priests and the scribes know what would happen when they set this course of events in motion. It would be the bloody end of this pretender—just another failed messiah who couldn't save the Jews from oppression. The women who go to the tomb on the third day to anoint Jesus' lifeless body do so because a tomb is where the dead lie. A tomb is where rotting corpses are put. Nothing but the bleeding, stinking, mad shadow of Jesus remains. Or so they thought.

In the angels' admonishment of the terrified women at the tomb—"Why do you look for the living, among the dead?" (Luke 24:5)—we might hear something of God's incredulity at the end of Jonah, where God comically reminds the poor sot just how many animals there are in Nineveh. Frankly, the angels' question seems unfair, but it is a reminder to the women—as it is to us—that our God promises release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and right-sided life in the world to come.

PRAYER

Lord, whether we find ourselves in the belly of a big fish or staring forlornly at the crucified Christ, we know, O God, that not everything is as it seems. Show us the way of the One who lifts the lowly, brings the powerful to their knees—and robs graves. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2019

Gary Glasser / Vice President, PTS Student Association

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 7:6-11

6 For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. 7 It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. 8 It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of

Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, 10 and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. 11 Therefore, observe diligently the commandment—the statutes, and the ordinances—that I am commanding you today.

DEVOTIONAL

It is really miraculous to be considered a treasured possession by the Lord our God, is it not? Just let that thought rest with you for a few moments. We are his people, his prized possessions! And not because of anything we do to deserve it but just by believing in him and loving him. And not because we are many, not because we are the best, not because we are the biggest. In fact, we are the least of all peoples!

I witnessed the Lord's work with his treasured possessions when I was in India on a mission trip. In this area, almost all the women work on giant tea plantations picking tea leaves in the hot, relentless sun. They constantly have to bend over to pick the tiny tea leaves and put them in a burlap sack they each drag behind them. At the end of every day their bags are weighed, and if they haven't met their quota they don't get paid. (But their tea leaves are kept by the owners.)

One night I attended a Bible study led by two women in a hut that wasn't tall enough for anyone over 5'10" to stand up straight in. That night two more women attended for the first time; they'd slipped out of the surrounding forest into the hut with several candles serving as a beacon. I watched as the new attendees listened rapturously with smiles on their faces to the words of Scripture. They sat there until it was time for them to go, as it had gotten dark and there was a rogue elephant at large in the forest. I felt like I was watching the work of Jesus' earliest disciples as they spread the word. I watched as four tea-leaf gatherers received the word of God and knew they were among God's prized possessions.

Isn't that something? In a world of people consumed with trying to be the best, the richest, the strongest, the most popular, God reminds us that he does not love anyone for being the greatest but because he has chosen us, and we are simply to follow him and stay true to his commandments. He will love us, no matter how numerous or powerful we are or how poor and burdened we may be

PRAYER

Dear God, grant me the clarity each day to go out into the world and notice those you put in my way to provide them evidence of your love for your treasured possessions. Let me share the gratitude I feel for the life you have given me and extend myself to others.

FRIDAY, MARCH 8, 2019

Angela Rishell, M.Div. '18 / Pastor, Ringgold and North Freedom United Methodist Churches, Ringgold, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 1:35-42

35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" 39 He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). 42 He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

DEVOTIONAL

This story of John and his disciples is a great reminder of what discipleship is really supposed to look like. We don't know how long the two had been following John, but we know from their being called "disciples" that these men had been committed to their teacher. The moment John recognized the "Lamb of God," they immediately dropped their post and changed direction. Too often, as Christians we find ourselves going through the motions of busy daily lives. We believe that the life to which we have committed ourselves is pleasing to God, but we rarely allow God to intervene in our routine. I wonder what kind of powerful impact it would have if we followed the example of these two disciples by asking Jesus every day the all-important question, "Where are you staying?" and then, in response to that answer, dwell in that place with Him, thereby encouraging others to do the same. This season of Lent is an ideal time to reevaluate what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Take time at the beginning of this day to ask that question, discern Christ's response, and see what amazing things God will do with you.

PRAYER

Lord, where are you staying? Where are you going? Where are you leading? I desire to be a committed disciple to you, and I am willing to go wherever you lead. Guide my heart to love what you love. Guide my mouth to speak your words. Guide my mind to think your thoughts. Guide my hands and feet to go and serve your people with joy and love. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 2019

Christopher M. Graham Jr., M.Div. '18 / Emlenton, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Titus 3:1-15

1 Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. 9 But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. 10 After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, 11 since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned. 12 When I send Artemas to you, or Tychicus, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. 13 Make every effort to send Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way, and see that they lack nothing. 14 And let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive. 15 All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with all of you.

DEVOTIONAL

“For we ourselves were . . . passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.” Such is our *modus operandi*, our standard operating procedure, our way of living in the world. In our fallen world, we do not come pre-programmed with the way of love for other people. This place of malice is where we start and where we stand. Yet “according to his mercy” we need not stand, sit, or stay there. For the Spirit of God is poured out on the world through Jesus to enable our doing of good works. Speaking a bad word about our companions in the fellowship of humanity is at best stupid, Paul reminds us, while at worst such speech is a death-dealing false witness. So let us work on this flaw. Not that anything we do merits the kindness of our savior, but let us act as the heirs we are—heirs who are productive even though our inheritance is assured. Let

us learn the new way of our Lord and Master: the way of subjection, obedience, benediction, gentleness, tenderness, and consideration to the taking on of our full humanity in him until we know no other way than his.

PRAYER

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge you as the one God who made humanity of one blood for your own inheritance. Might we be made good and kind to our fellow creatures, indeed to your whole creation, even as you have shown us goodness and kindness in the appearance of your Son. Have mercy upon us and forgive us according to your goodness and loving kindness. Renew us by your Spirit that we might be justified by your grace, leading us to the one hope of eternal life in your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2019

Robin Sharp, M.Div. '18 / Wooster, Ohio

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 84

- 1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
- 2 My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
- 3 Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 4 Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. Selah
- 5 Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
- 6 As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
- 7 They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.
- 8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah
- 9 Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.
- 10 For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
- 11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
12 O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

DEVOTIONAL

Here in the midst of Lent, this season of intense contemplation for Christians as we prepare for that joyful Eastertide celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, we glimpse the times of trial found in both Testaments but most particularly those of Jesus in the wilderness. Over this 40-day period, some of us may engage this opportunity for renewal by fasting from certain foods. Others might fast from “screen time” to encounter the Lord personally in those nearest to them. Still others may take on a new task, such as meditation, prayer, Bible reading, or volunteering. Our common bond in all such activities is that each participant is seeking the “lovely dwelling place” of the Lord.

Psalm 84, at the time of its writing, most likely reflected the sense of people on a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem to seek God’s company. To us, however, this psalm can also have contemporary meaning in the light of God’s loving gift of the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, we know each of us is a temple of the Lord’s. As a consequence, in all that we do, others should see that Love within us—in the care we take of our physical world, the earth, which we see as God’s dwelling place, and of all its inhabitants as well. And let us seek God’s goodness and love for all those with whom we walk.

We need not travel far to seek the Lord of Hosts; the Lord is here.

PRAYER

Oh Lord God of Hosts, we joyfully give you thanks that we need not search far to find your Holy Shelter, for it surrounds us and is in us. In this season of Lent, we look to the birds merrily building their nests throughout creation in anticipation of the glorious spectacle of the Renewed Life to come. Let it be so. Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 11, 2019

The Rev. Michele Ward, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18 / Associate Pastor, Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, Md.

SCRIPTURE

John 2:1-12

1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples

had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” 4 And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” 5 His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” 6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. 8 He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. 9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” 11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. 12 After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days.

DEVOTIONAL

The first miracle of Jesus compels us to think of its darker connections to the suffering that both Mary and Jesus will endure at his crucifixion. Readily comes to mind the image of Jesus’ body pouring out blood and water when the soldiers pierced his side. (“But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out” [John 19:33-34]). Jesus, knowing what is to come, resists performing the miracle at Cana. He tells Mary it is not yet his time. He would often refer to his death as “my hour,” as he does here.

Jesus refers to his coming death many times through his ministry. These references reveal how present on his mind is the suffering yet to come. Perhaps here in Cana he wanted simply to take in this wedding celebration with his friends and family. Perhaps he did not want to contemplate his death or expose himself to others. But his mother had other plans in mind . . . and Jesus complied, thus setting aside his agency to say “no” and choosing to say “yes” to this “sign,” as the Gospel of John calls the miracles of Jesus. And each sign Jesus enacts is a small step toward his death, the ultimate sign of who he is and why he came into the world.

Lent is a season of small deaths for each one of us who chooses to journey on this road to the cross. As we daily let go of something in order to reflect on the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, let us contemplate the Sign-giver, who gives his very life.

PRAYER

Suffering God, thank you for the sacrifice you made on my behalf. You teach me how to persist in the face of the

darkness around me. I ask that in my life, too, you would turn water into wine, no matter the cost to me. Reveal to me where I need to resist evil and, by the power of your Holy Spirit, participate in transforming the ordinary into the miraculous. In the name of your son Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2019

The Rev. Jay Howell, D.Min. – Missional Leadership '18 / Associate Pastor for Discipleship and Mission, Germantown Presbyterian Church, Germantown, Tenn.

SCRIPTURE

John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

DEVOTIONAL

Sometimes it's easy to trash the moneychangers. They make an easy target. But did they really just set up shop with the intention of making a quick buck selling cattle, sheep, and doves? It was once explained to me that the whole apparatus for the sale of animals at the Temple was set up for the sake of removing a burden from travelers—people coming to worship at the Temple would not need to bring their own animals for sacrifice but could purchase an animal right there. The impetus was to make the process more convenient, more accessible. But how quickly convenience can lead to something else. It appears that in this passage, that's exactly what had happened. Instead of offering a service—instead of constituting a reasonable means of obtaining sacrifices—the system had turned into an opportunity for exploitation of the vulnerable traveler, those who lacked their own livestock, or those otherwise not already plugged into the system.

During this Lenten season, may we reflect on what we have done for the sake of convenience and discern whether that convenience has turned into something else—and if it has, let us repent . . . and let the Lord overturn the tables in our hearts and rebuild.

PRAYER

Holy God, guide our spirits to discern where we have become too comfortable and where that comfort has turned to the sin of complacency. Help us ever to keep our focus on worshiping you in truth and in joy. In the name of Christ Jesus, we pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2019

The Rev. Lezley J. Stewart, D.Min. – Reformed Theology '18 / Recruitment and Support Secretary of the Ministries Council, Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, U.K.

SCRIPTURE

John 2:23-3:15

2:23 When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone. 3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

DEVOTIONAL

When did you last have one of those nights when you couldn't sleep because questions were buzzing around in your mind? Were you thinking about work or family life? Or were your questions about God and faith?

I have always been a sympathetic reader of the story of Nicodemus. I have never believed that Nicodemus went to visit Jesus by night just so he could hide in the shadows. Instead, I like to assume that his questions were just so important that they couldn't wait till the morning to be asked. Why spend a sleepless night mulling over such big questions of life and faith when Jesus could be approached right there and then?

Do we sometimes hold back our searching questions for no reason? If we trust and believe in the presence of the Spirit, we can approach God at any time.

Do we sometimes forget our enthusiasm to learn something new? Have we forgotten the first flush of faith, when we were excited to be always learning?

The adventure of faith that Nicodemus embarked on that dark night, with Jesus, is the same adventure that lies before us each color-filled day. So seize the day—the moment. For God, in mystery, is in all our questions and wondering.

PRAYER

God of surprises,
You bless us by your presence
Even in the dark places.

You dwell with us,
And live in our deepest questions.
You inspire new discoveries
In all who have open hearts and minds.

God, you are our eternal home—
In you, we are already found.
Keep us faithful and full of faith,
For you have much to teach us, Day by day.
Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2019

The Rev. David Schell, M.Div. '18 / Pastor, Fairplain Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor, Mich.

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5

9:23 And when the LORD sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, "Go up and occupy the land that I have given you," you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God, neither trusting him nor obeying him. 24 You have been rebellious against the LORD as long as he has known you. 25 Throughout the forty days and forty nights that I lay prostrate before the LORD when the LORD intended to destroy you, 26 I prayed to the LORD and said, "Lord GOD, do not destroy the people who are your very own possession, whom you redeemed in your greatness, whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. 27 Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; pay no attention to the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin, 28 otherwise the land from which you have brought us might say, 'Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to let them die in the wilderness.' 29 For they are the people of your very own possession, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm." 10:1 At that time the LORD said to me, "Carve out two tablets of stone like the former ones, and come up to me on the mountain, and make an ark of wood. 2 I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you smashed, and you shall put them in the ark." 3 So I made an ark of acacia wood, cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and went up the mountain with the two tablets in my hand. 4 Then he wrote on the tablets the same words as before, the ten commandments that the LORD had spoken to you on the mountain out of the fire on the day of the assembly; and the LORD gave them to me. 5 So I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the tablets in the ark that I had made; and there they are, as the LORD commanded me.

DEVOTIONAL

Carve. Come. Make.

Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mt. Horeb pleading with God not to destroy Israel, and the first words credited to God are three actions: Carve, Come, and Make.

Carve the tablets.
Come to the mountain.
Make an ark of wood.

Moses' first required action was not to come to God, but to prepare to come to God. Do the hard hammer work of

carving out a space to receive God's word. Carve this chunk of stone into something suitable for receiving what God had to say.

Then, once he was prepared, Moses was to Come to the mountain. Come and hear the words of God, who says, "I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets."

Finally, Make. After carving a space for God's word, and coming to God to receive it, Moses is to Make a space for God's word—a physical space where God's word will be kept and honored and, hopefully, obeyed.

How often do we casually flip open our Bibles without having done the work in advance to carve our hearts of stone into the kind of surface onto which God can speak God's word? How often do we fail to come to hear God's word at all? And how often do we climb down from the mountain and deposit the word God has spoken to us in any old place, rather than in a specially made place of privilege in our hearts to be honored and obeyed?

PRAYER

God who still speaks, remind us to listen. Remind us to prepare our hearts to hear, as Moses prepared the tablets. Remind us to come in eagerness to hear the word you speak. And help us to keep that word close in our hearts—and by your loving power obey it.

FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 2019

The Rev. Judith McMillan, D.Min. – Missional Leadership '18 / Interim Pastor, St. Thomas Community Presbyterian Church, Shelby Township, Mich.

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

12 So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. 14 Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, 15 yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. 16 Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. 17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who

loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 20 You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. 21 He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. 22 Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

DEVOTIONAL

When from my backyard I look up at the sky at night, I see tall trees and a few tall buildings with neon signs. Sometimes, when the lights are off, I can see a few stars. This is city living. When I am on retreat in the desert, it is the night sky, glimmering and moving with light and color against a dark background, where I feel a different kind of awe. All those stars—they are images of God's promises fulfilled. And they remind me that God's promises involve enacting justice and service to the weak and powerless—and require the same by me.

God places God's very heart "in love on [Israel's] ancestors." In love, God is with creation, with God's people, with the world. As partakers in God's nature, we are called to follow God—not in fear, but for our own "well-being." We are commanded to serve God, heart and soul, for well-being that pursues the well-being of others also. While we may not see the stars each night, we can and do trust the divine promises they remind us of, and we take care to seek out the light in the darkness. Let us take care to see with our own eyes the beauty of serving and worshiping God alone.

PRAYER

Holy God, we are to worship you alone. In doing so, help us to serve the "least of these" and take care to listen to those who seek out your light in their lives. As people who wander bright city streets, minister to others during quiet retreats, or sit with those who grieve, inspire in us awe and wonder at the ways we are privileged to join in your work, in good and faithful company with you. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2019

Ryan P. Lucas, M.Div. '18 / Co-pastor, First and South United Church of Christ, Ebensburg, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 4:1-26

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John"—
2 although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who

baptized—3 he left Judea and started back to Galilee. 4 But he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." 16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

DEVOTIONAL

In the Coptic Orthodox tradition, St. Bishoy (320-417) had two encounters with the living Christ. Once, when on a pilgrimage, Bishoy discovered an old man lying on the side of the road. He picked up and carried the old man, but his load began to lighten. Eventually Bishoy realized that he was carrying the Lord. Jesus disappeared after promising to keep Bishoy's body from decaying. (It is still entombed today.) Later, as Bishoy washed the feet of visitors, he was amazed when he realized he was washing the scarred feet of Jesus.

Copts today still recognize Bishoy as a pure and holy Saint. Last year, with others from Pittsburgh Seminary, I visited St. Bishoy's monastery in northern Egypt. The desert that surrounds the monastery is bone dry, but life still exists here. And now, when I read John 4 I can well imagine Jesus and Bishoy's having some great conversations in the desert. Hospitality and love for neighbor extend fully when we find ourselves in inhospitable places.

To the woman at Samaria, Jesus gave a gift that goes beyond a simple drink of water in the desert. He gave her the assurance of life now and hereafter. As we venture through our own journeys in the often inhospitable world, let us exercise the ability and opportunities we are given to share with others this loving, living water of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Lord, when we find ourselves lost in the desert, provide for us something to drink. When we journey through life's uncertainty, grant us peace and welcoming. O God, like our brother Bishoy, find your favor in us as we continue to welcome strangers, help them on their journeys, and share the loving, living water of Christ with all we meet. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2019

The Rev. Jennifer L. Stroud, D.Min. – Parish Ministry '18 / Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Port St. Lucie, Fla.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 42

- 1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
- 3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
- 4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
- 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help 6 and my God.

- My soul is cast down within me;
 therefore I remember you
 from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
 from Mount Mizar.
- 7 Deep calls to deep
 at the thunder of your cataracts;
 all your waves and your billows
 have gone over me.
- 8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
 and at night his song is with me,
 a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God, my rock,
 "Why have you forgotten me?
 Why must I walk about mournfully
 because the enemy oppresses me?"
- 10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
 my adversaries taunt me,
 while they say to me continually,
 "Where is your God?"
- 11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
 Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

Anyone who has spent time in the desert learns, very quickly, how precious water is to every living thing. Without water one's mouth dries up, one's skin withers, one's internal organs begin to shut down. Without water one's physical body fades away and dies. So it is with our spirit's need for God.

Without our Lord, our lives are naught but a restless yearning, a thirst that is never abated. But when we discover Jesus our souls drink deeply, and we are refreshed and renewed in the life-giving water offered to us by our loving Creator, the Source of All Being. The Psalmist understands this truth and begins his song by declaring his great need for the Holy Other. But just as our faith can wax and wane through the joys and tribulations of this life's journey, so, too, is the Psalmist's faith challenged. He feels anxiety and depression come upon him, and he wonders why. Why has he forgotten how much the Lord has done for him? Why do we?

By the end of the Psalm, the writer has remembered that only the Lord can keep us sane and safe in this world. Only God can quench every thirst and fulfill every need. By God's grace we also will recall to our minds and our hearts this astounding truth as we experience the ups and downs of our own journeys. This day, thirstily partake of the peace, the joy, and the love given to you by our great God. Meditate on the unending blessings given to you by the Lover of your soul. Remember, drink deeply, and be renewed!

PRAYER

Lord I am dry—as brittle as branches in a parched and arid land. I am thirsty for the things this world cannot give me. Fill me, Lord, to overflowing. I need the joy of knowing that You love me more than I will ever understand. I need the comfort of remembering that I am never alone—that Your presence is always with me. I need the power of Your Holy Spirit to strengthen me and teach me so that I do not lose my way. Remind me of the blessings You have showered upon me when the world tries to darken my day. Help me to shine the brightness of Your love and light! In Jesus Holy Name I pray. Amen!

MONDAY, MARCH 18, 2019

The Rev. Debbie Smith, M.Div. '18 / Pastor, Liberty Presbyterian Church, Liberty Boro, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 4:27-42

27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" 28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" 30 They left the city and were on their way to him. 31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35 Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." 39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

DEVOTIONAL

The account of the woman at the well tells a story of unexpected abundance and harvest. After encountering

Jesus, this woman leaves her water jug behind and invites the town to “come and see.” Jesus has sown the seeds of hope during their conversation and reaps the harvest of new discipleship. The woman is transformed: formerly an outsider, now she is an exuberant follower, so excited about meeting Jesus that she sows seeds of Good News among the townspeople, thus bringing them to abide with Jesus. What a harvest we see here! Outsiders recognizing what many insiders had not: Jesus is the Savior of the World—a world that includes even Gentiles! Praise God for unexpected sowers and reapers who can see what others have not yet seen!

PRAYER

Gracious Lord, who plants seeds of grace in our hearts, give us the courage to sow the seeds of our experience of the Good News with those you place in our path. Lead us to expect an abundant harvest that draws people to you as it nourishes us and brings more seeds, more sowers, and more reapers. In the name of Christ our Savior, amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2019

The Rev. C. Mark Scott, D.Min. – Parish Ministry '18 / Supply Preacher and Interim Pastor (honorably retired pastor and hospice chaplain), Inverness, Fla.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 2:1-13, 29-32

1 The word of the LORD came to me, saying: 2 Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD:
I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.
3 Israel was holy to the LORD,
the first fruits of his harvest.
All who ate of it were held guilty;
disaster came upon them,
says the LORD.
4 Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. 5 Thus says the LORD:
What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?
6 They did not say, “Where is the LORD
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through,
where no one lives?”

7 I brought you into a plentiful land
to eat its fruits and its good things.
But when you entered you defiled my land,
and made my heritage an abomination.
8 The priests did not say, “Where is the LORD?”
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and went after things that do not profit.
9 Therefore once more I accuse you,
says the LORD,
and I accuse your children’s children.
10 Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.
11 Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.
12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
says the LORD,
13 for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.
29 Why do you complain against me?
You have all rebelled against me,
says the LORD.
30 In vain I have struck down your children;
they accepted no correction.
Your own sword devoured your prophets
like a ravaging lion.
31 And you, O generation, behold the word of the LORD!
Have I been a wilderness to Israel,
or a land of thick darkness?
Why then do my people say, “We are free,
we will come to you no more”?
32 Can a girl forget her ornaments,
or a bride her attire?
Yet my people have forgotten me,
days without number.

DEVOTIONAL

Jeremiah did the thankless task of telling his fellow Israelites they were wrong! He found no joy in it. Yet he was obedient and said to them what the Lord gave him to say. It is easier to confront people you don’t know than people you do know. Jeremiah knew, lived among, and identified with those to whom he prophesied. It is a sensitive matter to confront those near and familiar to you, for often they take offense and fight back!

Jeremiah was hurt and rejected for his obedience to the Lord. I respect him for what he did. I feel sympathy for his pain. I

know what it feels like to be rejected by others for obeying the Lord. Jeremiah's own people had forsaken the "fountain of living water"!

Why do people turn away from what is life-giving? Why do I myself do so? Why did Jeremiah's people build "cracked cisterns that can hold no water"? Where have you and I replaced truth with a lie?

Today, can we listen to the Jeremiahs in our lives and repent? Or will we keep living a lie, keep following "the deceitful waywardness of the human heart" (R. E. Clements)?

PRAYER

Lord, help me to listen to You when I don't like what You are saying—at those times I need to hear You the most. Your words warn me against willfully abandoning You. Thank You for caring enough to confront me. In Christ Jesus I pray. Amen!

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Marjorie Davis, M.Div. '18 / Executive Pastor, Grace Tabernacle Community Ministries, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Romans 1:28–2:11

1:28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. 29 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. 2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. 2 You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." 3 Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. 6 For he will repay according to each one's deeds: 7 to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 while

for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality.

DEVOTIONAL

In 1992, my son Carl got AIDS. As African Americans, we first sought help from within that community, but it was the openly gay white community whom God used to change Carl's heart, though Carl wasn't gay. That community quickly embraced us unconditionally, poured out their love on us, shared their resources, even invited us on retreats, which we attended. We met some of the most funny, happy, and loving people. They knew they were loved and supported among themselves and countered the blame and condemnation from others. Carl began seeing them as individuals, not society's image of them, and through their acceptance of Carl God changed his heart. One day he said to me, "Mom, if I hadn't gotten AIDS, I wouldn't have come to know Jesus."

During this season of Lent, let us confess that we all need a change of heart, and it begins with accepting Jesus and knowing the truth of God's word. In 1992, Carl passed. Oh, thank you Father for changing his heart, for saving him and showing him that we are all sinners saved by grace. Oh, to be loved by you.

Our text from Romans warns against all kinds of lifestyles that dishonor God. Too many of us excuse our sinful ways by pointing fingers at others. But let us not deny anyone the same access to God's forgiveness, love, and grace as the rest of humanity. As Christians, our witness should be to the unsaved—to those who do "not see fit to acknowledge God" (1:28). Let us not pass judgment, for in doing so we "condemn" ourselves, since we are also sinners. Let us humbly recognize today that, indeed, "God shows no partiality" (2:11).

PRAYER

Dear great and loving Father, how foolish so many of us show ourselves to be. Yet how gracious and unconditional you are in your love for and patience with us in spite of our blame and shame. Oh, how your heart must grieve seeing how we continue to condemn those we believe do not deserve your love, often because we feel we don't deserve it ourselves. How beautiful that your family consists of all kinds of people. Thank you, Abba, that you are no respecter of persons, that you show no partiality. Chastise us, Lord, for always asking for help and praying for forgiveness, yet never allowing you to change our attitudes and hearts. Forgive us, oh God.

THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2019

Michael Clark, M.Div. '18 / Elizabeth, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 5:19-29

19 Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. 20 The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. 21 Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. 22 The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. 24 Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. 25 Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; 27 and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."

DEVOTIONAL

In this discourse Jesus makes clear his identity with God. Whoever sees and hears Jesus sees and hears God. Whoever honors Jesus honors God. Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us. The name does not tell us where God is; rather, it tells us where we are—we who know Jesus are in the presence of God. It is for this reason that we can trust in the authority of Jesus to judge, and we can rejoice in the grace of Jesus to give life.

Jesus both assures us of eternal life in the future resurrection and declares that "the hour . . . is now here" when we who were dead in sin may have new life in Christ. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). As we wait and prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, let us remember that we need not wait for the presence of God to bring life and hope and joy to our lives and our communities.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, we thank You and praise You. Teach us to celebrate the resurrection not only as something that will come, but also as something that is already happening. Even

as you granted to Jesus to have life in himself, hallelujah, you have given us life in Jesus, in whose name we say: Amen!

FRIDAY, MARCH 22, 2019

Amy Jun, M.Div. '18 / Senior Pastor, Verona–Rosedale–Community United Methodist Church, Aspinwall, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Romans 2:25-3:18

2:25 Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart — it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God. 3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. 3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written,

"So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging."

5 But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world? 7 But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? 8 And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), "Let us do evil so that good may come"? Their condemnation is deserved! 9 What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, 10 as it is written:

"There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;

there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."

13 "Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of vipers is under their lips."

14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;
16 ruin and misery are in their paths,
17 and the way of peace they have not known."
18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

DEVOTIONAL

The first human beings, made in the image of God, were meant to live their lives as righteous beings. But their disobedience to God brought them under the power of evil, and their sin has tainted all humanity ever since. There is no one who is righteous, not even one. When the God of mercy revealed His righteousness and its requirements of humbled humanity by means of laws, God's people instead boasted in the Law! They misunderstood God's intention. They could not perfectly keep God's law, so it could not make them righteous.

Where, then, can we find our righteousness? In Jesus Christ, who came to the world as the righteousness of God. If we dwell in Christ, his righteousness will shine on us, and we will be instruments of reflecting his righteousness to others. Dwell in Christ!

PRAYER

Loving God, thank you that you've revealed your righteousness to us through Your Son Jesus Christ. Let your righteousness shine on us so that we may dwell in it. Through us, let your righteousness be revealed as power breaking through all darkness and making our world bright. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2019

Robin Sharp, M.Div. '18 / Wooster, Ohio

SCRIPTURE

John 7:1-13

1 After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. 2 Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. 3 So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; 4 for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." 5 (For not even his brothers believed in him.) 6 Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. 7 The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. 8 Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come." 9 After saying this, he remained in Galilee. 10 But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. 11 The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, "Where is he?" 12 And there was considerable complaining about him

among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." 13 Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews.

DEVOTIONAL

". . . for my time has not yet fully come." Jesus had little doubt he would be arrested if he attended the Festival of Booths, a harvest-time event. He also knew the Jewish leaders wished to have him killed. If he had been arrested then, would the leaders' wish have been fulfilled? Or instead, would his "infractions" have been seen as "misdemeanors," with his arrest a mere annoyance to the Roman courts? His arrest for many "minor" incidents could have weakened the impact of the final drama in Jerusalem. And instead of the people's transition from acclaiming him "Hosanna!" to calling out "Crucify!" their last response might have been "Ho-hum—this again?"

Jesus knew his crucifixion could only occur with the backing of Rome. Pontius Pilot had to be put in a position to order Jesus' death. Without the additional crowds journeying to the Temple for Passover, would that necessity have transpired?

Jesus perhaps understood that his death, and therefore also his resurrection, had to take place in the time of planting and renewal. Spring is that time. Would the ultimate joy be as overwhelming in another season? Jesus understood that "right-timing" his death on the cross was essential. Easter had to come when his Father had planned it. Jesus' death could not be rushed, nor could it be avoided. In the end, Christ knew when his time had come.

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, help us to remember the importance of not rushing to a goal. In our life with you, help us to recognize our need to step back and ponder the journey. As you did, so also help us to understand when the time has fully come to accomplish your purposes in our lives. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2019

PJ Pfeuffer, Th.M. '18 (and M.Div. '12) / Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 150

1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament![a]
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

- 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
- 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
- 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

“Praise.” But wait—have I been good enough, present enough, self-bettering enough since Lent of last year? Sometimes praise can be the farthest thing from our minds as we make our mental self-examination checklists during Lent. But into the din comes the voice of the psalmist: “Praise.”

The 150th Psalm closes the Psalter with a glorious crescendo exhorting the reader or listener time and time again to “praise.” In this ending to a collection of poetry that covers the broad spectrum of human emotions, that gives voice to the agony of despair, we are faced with the overwhelming refrain that we are called to worship. All creation is called to worship alongside us with whatever noise, whatever breath it can muster. There is no room for negativity and self-doubt in the midst of such celebration. Even, perhaps especially in this season of reflection and repentance, let us find great joy in the Lord—and praise him!

PRAYER

Praise you in your sanctuary, Lord. Praise you in your mighty firmament! Praise you for your mighty deeds! Praise you for your surpassing greatness! We praise you with music and dance, with loud celebration and quiet breath. O Lord, we praise you!

MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2019

The Rev. Colin Pritchard, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18 / Minister, First Presbyterian Church in Victor, N.Y.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 6

- 1 O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath.
- 2 Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.
- 3 My soul also is struck with terror,
while you, O LORD — how long?
- 4 Turn, O LORD, save my life;
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.
- 5 For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who can give you praise?

- 6 I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.
- 7 My eyes waste away because of grief;
they grow weak because of all my foes.
- 8 Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.
- 9 The LORD has heard my supplication;
the LORD accepts my prayer.
- 10 All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror;
they shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame.

DEVOTIONAL

The Psalmist speaks in a singular voice, yet the petition rings true for all creation. In these days, too, there are moments of languishing and terror, tears and a sense of separation from the source of all joy. With floods and fire, increasing fatal acts of violence, political strife, and momentary victories for darkness, it can be easy to join the Psalmist in weary weeping. Yet we are not rebuked for our tears.

“Turn, O Lord.” How we long to see the face of God. Could it be that the gracious, whispered reply of the Holy is simply this: “Return”? It is true that God’s love is steadfast, and our prayers are accepted. God longs for us as well. In the eternal turning of God to us, and our returning to God, one thing must flee: Be gone weary hopelessness, for the Lord has heard our supplication. The stone rolls away, for that has always been the story of Grace.

PRAYER

Most Holy God, this day we pray that you will accept our prayers once again. May your promise release our fear. May your love inform our hope. May the requirements of your compassion guide our repentance. Return us to our labors as bearers of your light. May fear be the only thing afraid as we walk with you this day. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 26, 2019

M. Courtenay Willcox, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18 / Graduate Student, United Lutheran Seminary, Gettysburg, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 91

- 1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
- 2 will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.”
- 3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;

- 4 he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
- 5 You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
- 6 or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.
- 7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
- 8 You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.
- 9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.
- 11 For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
- 12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
- 13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under
foot.
- 14 Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
- 15 When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
- 16 With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

DEVOTIONAL

The Psalms address the span of human emotions, from praise to lament, from gratitude to grief. Especially during Lent, as I seek to find my wilderness footing, Psalm 91 grounds and convicts me of God's profound care, love, and presence. This Psalm offers hope of God's protection. We live in a world where that need of protection is a daily reality. We face natural disasters, but daily we witness or read about disasters made from human hands. Those human misunderstandings and misinterpretations play out through hateful words, acts of violence, and not recognizing or caring for our neighbor. But consider the whole of humankind huddled under the shelter of the Most High—what might it be like? What a wonderful place to gather. The promise that God is our refuge and fortress and the realization that we rest in the shadow of the Almighty makes for powerful and heady stuff. But they do not occur by default. They require our trust in God. That trust comes from a relationship, not with a God who is "over us" or "for us," but rather a God who is "with us." The triune God walks with us, knows us, and loves us; and so, in return, we trust in God.

PRAYER

Hearer of our hearts, show up in our lives in unmistakable ways; startle us to notice your presence and call. Challenge us to walk with you in all that we are and all that we do; challenge us to walk with our neighbor. Let us discern the path you have put before us. As we trust in you, let us seek refuge in the shadow of the Almighty and live in the shelter of the Most High.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2019

The Rev. John Cowie, D.Min. – Reformed Theology '18 / Minister, Stockbridge Parish Church, Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, U.K

SCRIPTURE

John 8:12-20

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." 13 Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." 14 Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge by human standards; I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. 17 In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. 18 I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." 19 Then they said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." 20 He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

DEVOTIONAL

"Then the Pharisees said to him, 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.'"
One has to feel sympathy for people confronted by Jesus. He did not behave or talk the way they expected, so it was easier to judge his testimony to be invalid. Making assumptions about people is part of human nature. We learn by making associations and noticing patterns. My baby granddaughter is learning to identify human faces; soon it will be cars, trees, animals, and birds. She will learn to generalize and classify—doing so saves time and brainpower. Adults judge people by their appearance, color, accent, dress, speech, and by what we already know. We then make assumptions about what we can't see—intelligence, trustworthiness, education, religious and political reliability, and so on. Listening to Jesus, the

Pharisees could not make sense of who he was, so they relied on their knowledge and experience to disregard him.

When we talk about Jesus, we will meet people who disregard him, and who regard our testimony to him as invalid. We should never underestimate how persistent, consistent, and understanding of others we must be in our witness about Christ, nor should we underestimate the great personal cost that our hearers' setting aside their hard-won knowledge and experience will involve.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we pray for the church's witness to Jesus Christ—a witness that is often colored more by our preferences than by the light of Christ. Illuminate our understanding so that our faith and worship reflect you more clearly. And to you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation for evermore! Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 28, 2019

The Rev. Luke Farwell, D.Min. – Reformed Theology '18 / Minister of Word and Sacrament, First United Presbyterian Church of De Pere, Green Bay, Wis.

SCRIPTURE

John 8:21-32

21 Again he said to them, "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." 22 Then the Jews said, "Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" 23 He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. 24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." 25 They said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Why do I speak to you at all? 26 I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." 27 They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. 28 So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. 29 And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." 30 As he was saying these things, many believed in him. 31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

DEVOTIONAL

In the United States, a free press is understood to function in society as a counterbalance to the government's inherent inclination toward the abuse of power. The inestimable value of the press is therefore tied to the veracity of its reporting. The free press is useful to its citizens, and preserving of their freedoms, insofar as it can be trusted.

In John 8:21-32 we find Jesus engaged in a heated debate with his peers concerning the truth of His identity and their general misunderstanding His ministry and mission. The Gospel of John portrays Jesus as besought and beleaguered by those who are in need of the truth but who struggle to trust His words. In today's reading, we are challenged by the crowd's question to Jesus, "Who are you?" Never has there been uttered a more important question. Who is this person called Jesus of Nazareth?

In our nation, we are at crisis point regarding people's distrust of the very news they hear on a daily basis. As Christians, we proclaim that the source of our Truth allows us to understand in His light all other truths so that we might discern and recognize what can be trusted. Jesus promised his disciples, "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." This Lent let us commit ourselves in deepening our understanding of God's Truth as it has been disclosed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. By doing so we will be better equipped to seek, uphold, and share the truth of God's love with the world.

PRAYER

Gracious God, You are the Truth that sets us free to be citizens of your kingdom. Let us, therefore, rejoice in the truth as we seek to follow your Son, who came to set all people free from the chains of ignorance and injustice. Help us to recognize our own duplicitous nature in spreading falsehoods and seeking to mislead others. Bring us into the light of your Son, that we might repent of our sins and recommit ourselves to the sharing of your Good News. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 29, 2019

Daniel J. DeBrucker, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18 / Graduate Student, Union Theological Seminary in New York City, N.Y. / National Organizer, Presbyterian Network to End Homelessness

SCRIPTURE

John 8:33-47

33 They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" 34 Jesus answered them,

“Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. 37 I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. 38 I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.” 39 They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, 40 but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. 41 You are indeed doing what your father does.” They said to him, “We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.” 42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. 44 You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? 47 Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.”

DEVOTIONAL

“We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me.” (vv. 41-42). During these 40 days of reflection on Jesus’ death for our sins and the renewal of our baptismal commitment, a lot is at stake. Are we following Jesus, or our own sinful desires?

My work with homeless and low-income individuals allows me to ask this question of myself when I am on the streets. Jesus tells us, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). When we pass by someone in need in order to take care of our own needs first, that is sin. And “the slave has no permanent place in the household” (v. 35). When we feed the hungry, house the homeless, put clothes on the naked, we are following Jesus, who invited all to feast at the table.

A couple of years ago in Portland, I stopped under a bridge to escape an approaching rainstorm. There I met Charlie. Charlie had lost his home and family, but not his dignity. Charlie had also lost his church—it had kicked him out because of his substance use and joblessness—but not his faith. We prayed, and when I asked him what he missed about church, his response was, “Communion.” He knew that his sins were hurting himself and others, and it had been close to twenty-

years since he had taken Communion. I told him to hang on, then brought a pastor friend, some coffee, and a sandwich, and the three of us, under the bridge, shared Communion. We all cried; then Charlie blessed us on our way. I left with the amazing feeling that we had pleased God, and the Spirit was alive in Charlie. Charlie had prayed for our visit for nearly two decades. Isn’t it amazing how the Holy Spirit works!

PRAYER

Creator and sustainer, here we are, thanking you for the day of Easter ahead and the laughter of your children of all ages. Lord, we sometimes fall off the wagon and think of ourselves before others, including the strangers we have yet to meet. You remind us of this failing, yet stick by us through all our errors. Lord, we are blessed to be children in your kingdom, and though we are not perfect, we know you understand and are there to guide us. Please keep our brothers and sisters safe, give us the hope we are seeking, and remind us of our baptism, especially during this Lenten season. In your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 2019

Victoria (Tor) Voller, M.Div. '18 / Calvert Memorial Presbyterian Church, Etna, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Romans 6:12-23

12 Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. 13 No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. 14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

15 What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, 18 and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. 19 I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. 20 When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you

now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. 22 But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

DEVOTIONAL

To this day I remember that, during my growing-up years, the price for receiving a favor from any one of my sisters was to be that sister's "slave for a week." This price meant that I was obligated to do anything asked of me; at the same time, the "favor" I received meant that, in some ways, I could take on elements of being the "master." I usually made this bargain with the sister who hated to clean—something I too despised but, for the right favor, was willing to obligate myself to.

In contrast, and fortunately for us Christians, we have a God who loves us so much that he gives us grace apart from such a bargain—apart from our following the Law. God's grace brings freedom. It unchains us from the sin and death that we, imperfect people, cannot overcome by perfectly following the Law. It unchains us for obedience to God according to the teachings of our faith. "But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification." Sanctification is a refining process that sets us apart from the things of the world—from sin and death. God's grace gifts us with eternal life in Jesus Christ. Being my sister's "slave" only bought me the favor of 30 minutes of television time. Eternal life with Jesus . . . surely that is worth the "price" of the blessings received for our obedience to God.

PRAYER

Gracious and Heavenly Lord, please watch over us today. Help us to avoid the temptations of this world, for we know that our obedience is to you and you alone. You know the plans for our lives; please help us to stay on the pathway to your plan. We pray all these things in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2019

Benjamin Rumbaugh, M.Div.–MSPPM '18 / Chaplain Resident, Veteran Affairs Pittsburgh Healthcare System, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 14:1-22

1 The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought:

- 2 Judah mourns
and her gates languish;
they lie in gloom on the ground,
and the cry of Jerusalem goes up.
- 3 Her nobles send their servants for water;
they come to the cisterns,
they find no water,
they return with their vessels empty.
They are ashamed and dismayed
and cover their heads,
- 4 because the ground is cracked.
Because there has been no rain on the land
the farmers are dismayed;
they cover their heads.
- 5 Even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn
because there is no grass.
- 6 The wild asses stand on the bare heights,
they pant for air like jackals;
their eyes fail
because there is no herbage.
- 7 Although our iniquities testify against us,
act, O LORD, for your name's sake;
our apostasies indeed are many,
and we have sinned against you.
- 8 O hope of Israel,
its savior in time of trouble,
why should you be like a stranger in the land,
like a traveller turning aside for the night?
- 9 Why should you be like someone confused,
like a mighty warrior who cannot give help?
Yet you, O LORD, are in the midst of us,
and we are called by your name;
do not forsake us!
- 10 Thus says the LORD concerning this people:
Truly they have loved to wander,
they have not restrained their feet;
therefore the LORD does not accept them,
now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins.
- 11 The LORD said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people. 12 Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I do not accept them; but by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence I consume them. 13 Then I said: "Ah, Lord GOD! Here are the prophets saying to them, 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place.' 14 And the LORD said to me: The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. 15 Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name though I did not send them, and who say, "Sword and famine shall not come on this land": By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed. 16 And the people to whom they prophesy shall be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword. There shall be no one to bury them — themselves, their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I

will pour out their wickedness upon them.

17 You shall say to them this word:

Let my eyes run down with tears night and day,
and let them not cease,

for the virgin daughter — my people — is struck down
with a crushing blow,
with a very grievous wound.

18 If I go out into the field,

look — those killed by the sword!

And if I enter the city,

look — those sick with famine!

For both prophet and priest ply their trade throughout the
land,
and have no knowledge.

19 Have you completely rejected Judah?

Does your heart loathe Zion?

Why have you struck us down

so that there is no healing for us?

We look for peace, but find no good;

for a time of healing, but there is terror instead.

20 We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD,

the iniquity of our ancestors,

for we have sinned against you.

21 Do not spurn us, for your name's sake;

do not dishonor your glorious throne;

remember and do not break your covenant with us.

22 Can any idols of the nations bring rain?

Or can the heavens give showers?

Is it not you, O LORD our God?

We set our hope on you,

for it is you who do all this.

DEVOTIONAL

Jeremiah's prophecy is a heavy one. Reading it immediately brings feelings of shame, grief, and sadness. In a word, suffering. The image of thirst conveys the deep suffering of God's people. Lent is a time to rest in our suffering, a time to feel "parched" in God's absence, and this passage certainly fosters that feeling. Hope isn't easy.

In my work at an inpatient recovery center, I serve as a chaplain to Veterans who suffer from substance use and mental health diagnoses. The insidious nature of addiction and the complexity of the mind has challenged my easy notion of hope. I've realized that for much of my life I've dwelt securely in the proclamation that I'm part of the beloved community of believers living in the "here, but not yet" Kingdom of God. Jeremiah forces me to reconcile with the "not-yet" dimension of this proclamation.

As I slowly discover abundant life in the bleakest of settings through the ministry of chaplaincy, I'm realizing that suffering and hope aren't too far distant from each other. Maybe they're not dichotomous foes, but instead two sides of the same coin. They co-exist. Hope doesn't blot out suffering, and suffering doesn't get the final word. In the midst of the

drought, Jeremiah asks, "Is it not you, O Lord our God? We set our hope on you." Indeed, Lent is a time to rest, truly rest, in our suffering so that we may experience the full, soul-quenching source of God's hope for this world.

PRAYER

God, give me the strength to trust my thirst. Jesus Christ, give me the strength to dwell in my suffering so that I may dwell in your hope. Holy Spirit, give me the strength to discover God's abundant life.

MONDAY, APRIL 1, 2019

Roderick (Rick) Mason, Church Planting and Revitalization '18 / Ruling Elder, Mosaic Community Church, and Assistant Director of Service & Leadership, The Pittsburgh Project, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 145

- 1 I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
- 2 Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.
- 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.
- 4 One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
- 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
- 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
- 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.
- 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.
- 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
- 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
- 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
- 14 The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
- 15 The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.

- 16 You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
- 17 The Lord is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.
- 18 The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
- 19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;
he also hears their cry, and saves them.
- 20 The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.
- 21 My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

DEVOTIONAL

As the Psalmist speaks of the unsearchable greatness of the God we serve and how He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, I am reminded of how often this world that we live in falls short of the greatness of our God.

As I look at my wife, pregnant with our second child, I am filled with excitement and anticipation for holding our little one in our arms. I am equally filled with fear and concern as we bring this innocent child into a dark world, where hate seems to be the norm. At times, when I am walking down the street as a black man in America, I am abundantly aware of my race and how others may perceive me. They make assumptions about me without knowing me, and I in turn make assumptions about them. I am thankful that, though we live in a flawed world where, as a black man, I am not always seen as a person worthy of love and compassion, I can feel confident in the word of God, which declares, "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made" (v. 9). The same God who created me also created that fearful person walking down the street and created the child growing in my wife's womb.

In this dark world we live in, it is sometimes hard to see the light. But we as children of God are called not only to see the light but also to be the light. Part of being that light is using my mouth to speak about the greatness of the Lord and to sing His praises. Just when I am almost overcome with fear, I recall the words of the psalmist, "One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate" (vv. 4-5). I will surely meditate on your wondrous works, Lord! I will rejoice in my opportunity to laud your works and declare your mighty acts to my children—another generation! Thanks, be to God!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, my God, and King! I come before you in awe of your greatness. I pray that in those times of frustration that I will be gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love as you are so often with us, your children. I thank you, Lord, for upholding me when I am falling and raising me up when I am bowed down. I thank

you and praise you for filling all my desires, hearing my cry, and saving me! Amen.

TUESDAY, APRIL 2, 2019

Frances Lin, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18 / Executive Director, Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, San Diego, Calif.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 146

- 1 Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
- 2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
- 3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
- 4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
- 5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
- 6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
- 7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
- 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
- 9 The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
- 10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

When God created this world, He intended for it to be beautiful, for all His creations to coexist in serenity, contentment, and harmony. The question is not about how we can ever be in that state of being. It is about when. Today we may have the most advanced technology and the best quality of life in human history, thanks to God's blessings. Nevertheless, we are also experiencing the harsh reality of becoming our own worst enemy. The technology that is supposed to make our lives stronger, healthier, and happier has become a tool we use to fight against each other. We may think we have everything under our control. But in this Psalm the poet reminds us that the One and Only Lord is the mighty One. And He is forever faithful. He not only loves justice but is also full of compassion. The Lord is the only One who is trustworthy, the Only One we can place our hope in, and the Only One that will and can help when we call. Our

Lord is the One—the Only One—who is worthy of all praise, and His original intent will be fulfilled in His time.

PRAYER

Merciful God, I am grateful that Your love surpasses all knowledge and understanding. It is impossible to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love You have for me. May you speak to me in my heart to influence, direct, and guide my every step so Your purpose for me will be fulfilled to the fullest. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.n.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3, 2019

Sara Lawson, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18/ Oneonta Congregational Church, South Pasadena, Calif.

SCRIPTURE

Romans 8:1-11

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law — indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

DEVOTIONAL

"If only I could go back and change that." "I'm never going to be good enough." "What was I thinking?" We've all heard those voices before, the whispers that tell us we are no more than our past mistakes. Then Paul's booming voice shouts out the words, "No condemnation." What a beautiful promise. But what a difficult idea to hold onto. It is easier to dwell on our mistakes and regrets, to relive the past while wishing we

could go back and do things differently. Perhaps we even feel that we must punish ourselves for our sins. But Paul reminds us that Christ did for us what we were unable to do for ourselves and that there is no longer any condemnation for those of us who are in Christ. The punishment is over. And a new life is promised to all of us . . . if we can believe it.

So let's make a choice right now. Let's choose to believe that Christ's work on the cross was actually for us. Let's choose to stop living for the law that continually condemns us and instead live for the God who loved this world by giving His only Son for us. And let's choose to lay down the mistakes and regrets that hold us back and move forward in a new life characterized by grace and redemption—and thereby also give others a glimpse of the power of the cross.stunned. And I stop. And I start again. "And it will all be fine. You'll be down here and we'll be upstairs and it will be fine." And it was. Angels and shepherds and donkeys and drunks. All thrown together one Christmas Eve. In a place of God.

PRAYER

Lord God, thank you that through faith in your Son, who died and rose for us, we are no longer condemned. Forgive us when we forget what you have done for us. Remind us that we don't have to be "good enough" in order to receive your love. And teach us to live for you—no one and nothing else. Amen.

THURSDAY, APRIL 4, 2019

The Rev. Lori Walters, M.Div. '18 / Senior Pastor, Greenock United Methodist Church, Greenock, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 147:12-20

12 Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!
13 For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
14 He grants peace within your borders;
he fills you with the finest of wheat.
15 He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
16 He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
17 He hurls down hail like crumbs—
who can stand before his cold?
18 He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.
19 He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and ordinances to Israel.
20 He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his ordinances.
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

Often we Christians sit in visioning sessions for our congregations and brainstorm about what we can offer people to bring them into our church building—and then, what will make them want to come back. We strategize. We offer child care. We offer cry rooms. We plan out children's church and youth programming. We rehearse praise bands and choirs. Surely people will want to worship here. And in doing so, we sometimes program over the one thing that we can offer that will truly make a difference: God.

God is so powerful and merciful that "He can give snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes" (v. 16). Yet he can also "grant peace within your borders" (v. 14). Nothing in this world can compare to the wonder of the One True God, who comes to us in Triune form. The loving grace of the Father brings God to us as our Creator and Provider. God comes to us incarnate as the Christ to deliver us from sin and death. The wondrous Spirit engulfs us to guide us through the turmoil and blessings of this world and lead us into the next.

In our congregations we can offer a time of worshipping the Lord. We can offer the Scriptures for a better understanding of God. And we can come alongside each other in fellowship and deepen our relationships with God together. But it is the Lord God Almighty who opens the hearts of those who are seeking him. The amazing power and majesty of God are all that is needed for our life eternal. Praise the Lord!

PRAYER

You strengthen us and bless us, O Lord, because of Your endless love for us. This love is too great for us to comprehend, but we thank You for it and for the grace You shower upon us. How wonderful You are. You care for us. You grant us Your peace. When we falter, Lord, You pick us up. When we stray, You lead us home. We long to be in Your presence and ask for Your blessings of strength and comfort, that we may shine Your Light into the world. We love You, Lord, and praise your Name. Amen.

FRIDAY, APRIL 5, 2019

The Rev. Joshua Fisher, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18 (and M.Div. '14) / Co-Pastor, Lincoln Place Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 6:52-59

52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" 53 So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever." 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

DEVOTIONAL

I wonder why the author of this Gospel added, "He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum?" It seems like an obscure detail after such a confrontational teaching of Jesus—a teaching that leaves many confused, furious, or a little bit (or a whole lot) of both. And this incident doesn't mark the first time that Capernaum became a conflicted arena of hurt and rejection for Jesus. We read in the other Gospels that Jesus experienced significant rejection in Capernaum, and he has something to say about it: "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades" (Luke 10:15; Matt. 11:23). Capernaum seems to be a place in Jesus' life where he is simply misunderstood. And in each encounter, Jesus judges the city's rejection of him as a rejection of the Father—a rejection of God and God's Kingdom.

In the season of Lent, we are invited once again to allow the Holy Spirit to enter the Capernaums of our own hearts—the memories, hurts, or places of fear we simply refuse to let Jesus be. They are familiar places to many of us. They're the parts of our lives we hold on to tightly because they matter so dearly to us. Perhaps it is the Capernaums of our hearts that Jesus comes to with the invitation to partake of his life.

Which is precisely why the Church needs to participate in the Eucharistic celebration, to share in the blood and flesh of Christ. For every time we celebrate this meal, we open our hands and hearts before the Son of Man. We open our hands to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We open our hands as an embodied action that life is a gift, given at the expense of the flesh and blood of Christ. In this bread, in this cup, life is found. Many of us approach this table of love with what we cannot let go of; yet something happens to us when we open our hands to receive the bread and cup. It is hard to hang on to something and at the same time open one's hands. In this season of Lent, may we be honest about our Capernaums and allow Christ to be with us there, even if it is uncomfortable and contentious. For whoever eats this bread will live forever.

PRAYER

Loving God, you are the One who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one lost sheep. Please come again to

the Capernaums of our hearts and our world. May we be reminded in this season of Lent that You not only come seeking your sheep, but You also lay down Your life for Your sheep. May the Holy Spirit give us the courage to trust You in the places we do not trust letting go of so that we may know your abundant life, to the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 2019

The Rev. Jennifer L. Stroud, D.Min. – Parish Ministry '18 (and M.Div. '04) / Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Port St. Lucie, Fla.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 23:9-15

9 Concerning the prophets:

My heart is crushed within me,
all my bones shake;

I have become like a drunkard,
like one overcome by wine,
because of the LORD

and because of his holy words.

10 For the land is full of adulterers;

because of the curse the land mourns,
and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up.

Their course has been evil,
and their might is not right.

11 Both prophet and priest are ungodly;

even in my house I have found their wickedness,

says the LORD.

12 Therefore their way shall be to them

like slippery paths in the darkness,
into which they shall be driven and fall;

for I will bring disaster upon them
in the year of their punishment,

says the LORD.

13 In the prophets of Samaria

I saw a disgusting thing:
they prophesied by Baal

and led my people Israel astray.

14 But in the prophets of Jerusalem

I have seen a more shocking thing:
they commit adultery and walk in lies;

they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
so that no one turns from wickedness;

all of them have become like Sodom to me,
and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.

15 Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets:

“I am going to make them eat wormwood,
and give them poisoned water to drink;

for from the prophets of Jerusalem

ungodliness has spread throughout the land.”
for I am your servant.

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is traditionally a time of fasting and prayer—a time when we turn our eyes inward to look honestly at our lives and our walks with the savior we call Lord. Interestingly, the Lenten journey, our faith journey, starts with the birth of Christ into this world and the birth of Christ within us—and the inalterable joy and excitement we feel when we first believe in a God who would join us in this place. Just as when we first accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, the celebration of Christmas is often a time of gaiety and celebration, a time when people are encouraged to give presents, write cards, and smile at strangers. For a brief period it appears to be a time of good will and peace among all human beings. Once a year, for a fleeting, shining moment, the world becomes a closer expression of the harmonic life God envisions for us all.

But soon—too soon—the loving inclusion fades. The unity between the diverse and varied expressions of humankind grows faint and all but disappears, like the fire and excitement a new believer feels tends to bank and dim with the passing of years. For often, before we realize it, we find ourselves in the January of our faith journey with our ego, pride, and selfishness back in place and firmly in control. God watches as many of us who call ourselves Christians, lose our sense of who and whose we are as we place politics over faith, group identity over oneness in the Body of Christ.

God's word tells us that everyone who calls on the Holy Name of Jesus is a member of the priesthood of all believers. Jeremiah warns us to take care that our lives, our actions, our words, and our hearts should reflect our God and the way of love and light. For how we Christians live our lives when the newness of Christ's birth within us fades will be seen and noted—not just by the people we are called to serve and care for, but by our Holy Lord as well. And Jesus warns us that we will, indeed, reap what we sow.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, please forgive me when I forget that You are God and the owner of my heart, the caregiver of my life and the teacher of my soul. I confess that the world is convincing in its teaching that the acquisition of material things can bring happiness and that being right and being in power are more important than following You. Forgive me when I choose to judge others because of their politics, their education, the color of their skin, or the amount of money they have in their pockets. The love of power, fame, and material wealth can twist my Christian intentions from selflessness to selfishness, from welcoming to wall-building, and from caring to critical. I repent from my lack of faithfulness and ask that You light the way of love for me to follow, so that I might be guided by the truth and the life found within the way of Jesus Christ, in whose Name I pray. Amen!

SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 2019

The Rev. Graham McWilliams, D.Min. – Reformed Theology '18 / Minister, Comrie and Dundurn Parish Churches, Church of Scotland, Perthshire, U.K.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 84

- 1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
- 2 My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
- 3 Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 4 Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. Selah
- 5 Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
- 6 As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
- 7 They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.
- 8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah
- 9 Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.
- 10 For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
- 11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
- 12 O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

DEVOTIONAL

As God's people we face many difficult challenges, both personal and political, and we continue journeying through them in Lent. At this time of the season, we may feel exhausted in our Christian faith. Looking to the cross of Christ before us, we may be thinking, "Lord, how can I find the energy to go on?" And that is where we must stop, because living a life in faith is not about our finding anything. It is about receiving! As the psalmist says, "Happy are those whose strength is in you."

We have no strength but God's. We need no strength but God's. If the many challenges of the world have caused you to begin depending on yourself to overcome them, stop for a moment. Recognize that you are walking a more difficult path—a human path—than the one God intends for you. Behold your shield once more. Humbly bow your head in acknowledgement of your straying and receive the strength of God, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Know that you are able, once more, to lift your head, follow your heart, and continue your journey through your own valley of Baca with the cross of Christ as your guiding light, not your immediate goal.

PRAYER

Loving God, in our faith we know that You are always with us; yet the world tries to shield us from You, and we have become downcast. We pray that Your power and strength would overcome our human frailty, so that we may continue our journey through this pilgrimage of Lent until we can lift our heads upward to see the glory of Your risen and ascended presence. Amen.

MONDAY, APRIL 8, 2019

Corey D. Rugh, M.Div. '18 / Graduate Student, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Va.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 119:73-80

- 73 Your hands have made and fashioned me;
give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.
- 74 Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,
because I have hoped in your word.
- 75 I know, O LORD, that your judgments are right,
and that in faithfulness you have humbled me.
- 76 Let your steadfast love become my comfort
according to your promise to your servant.
- 77 Let your mercy come to me, that I may live;
for your law is my delight.
- 78 Let the arrogant be put to shame,
because they have subverted me with guile;
as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.
- 79 Let those who fear you turn to me,
so that they may know your decrees.
- 80 May my heart be blameless in your statutes,
so that I may not be put to shame.

DEVOTIONAL

When reading these verses from Psalm 119 one easily sees the intimate language between "me," the fragile human, and "you," the Lord, the one to be feared (v. 74), the one

who judges (v. 75), the one who is faithful (v. 75), and the one who loves (v. 76). The psalm welcomes us into sharing a tender moment with the Lord. But this psalm is not merely a prayer flowing from a deep relationship with the Lord, though it certainly is that; it is also the psalmist's expression for the desire to know and follow the Lord "commandments," "word" (v. 73), "law" (v. 77), "precepts" (v. 78), "decrees" (v. 79), and "statutes" (v. 80).

Does this combination seem foreign to us? How many of us would naturally use "mercy" and "law" in the same sentence (v. 77)? Are we comfortable meditating on the Lord precepts as well as delighting in the law? Do we feel the threat of shame if our hearts are not found blameless in the statutes of our Lord (v. 80)? Do we hope that others who "fear" the Lord will "see" us and "turn" to us because we have hoped in His word and know His decrees?

As followers of Christ, we know that, many years after the writing of this psalm, a King, a Savior, was born in the small town of Bethlehem. He walked the earth proclaiming the kingdom of God, healing the sick, clashing with other Jewish leaders, and teaching the crowds who came to hear Him. He possessed abundant mercy, and all those to whom he showed mercy were given life (see v. 77). He corrected the misuse of the law by other Jewish leaders, such as the Pharisees, and showed his vast knowledge of and love for the Lord's commandments, precepts, decrees, and statutes. He taught a rich man that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. He promised that all who "see" and "turn" to Him will know the Lord and His ways. Thus, not only can we imagine Jesus praying these verses from Psalm 119, but we can also imagine that it is He to whom we have been praying this psalm all along.

PRAYER

Loving Father, we thank you for welcoming us into sharing a tender moment with you through the words of your servant. We pray that your steadfast love becomes our comfort and that we may take delight in your law and precepts. We thank you for our faithful King and Savior, Jesus Christ, who through his life, death, and resurrection has made it possible for our hearts to be found blameless in your statutes. We are grateful that our faith in Jesus is enough for you. May the Holy Spirit give us the fruits of love so that we may serve those around us. We pray all these things in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

TUESDAY, APRIL 9, 2019

The Rev. Jon Chillinsky, M.Div. '18/ Community Life Pastor, Calvary Church, Irwin, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 9:18-23

18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20 His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." 25 He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" 28 Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." 30 The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 39 Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

DEVOTIONAL

“. . . because they were afraid” Fear controls so many aspects of our lives; why let it control the proclamation of God’s goodness? I wonder how many miraculous events take place in our world on a daily basis without anyone’s ever hearing about them. Fear of what others will think or do in response to our describing our miracle, or attributing that miracle to God, hinders the power that story could have in someone’s life! But why should we be afraid? All good things come from God and should be attributed to God! The outcome of the proclamation is in God’s hands; our God-given responsibility is simply to share it—to share the story of our miracle. So let us take the example of the blind man, who speaks without fear of harsh punishments. Let us find our strength in God to speak forth the miraculous to everyone we encounter.

PRAYER

Father, we come to you through your Son and our Lord, Jesus, and by the power of the Spirit with thanksgiving. Continue to intervene in our lives in miraculous ways so that we may proclaim Your miracles to those near and far from You. Help us to not be gripped with fear, but instead give us the courage to be your spokespersons. May you be glorified in all we say and do. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10, 2019

Sr. Moonkyung Park, M.Div. '18 / Chaplain, Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center (Catholic Health Services of Long Island), West Islip, N.Y.

SCRIPTURES

Jeremiah 25:30-38

30 You, therefore, shall prophesy against them all these words, and say to them:

The LORD will roar from on high,
and from his holy habitation utter his voice;
he will roar mightily against his fold,
and shout, like those who tread grapes,
against all the inhabitants of the earth.

31 The clamor will resound to the ends of the earth,
for the LORD has an indictment against the nations;
he is entering into judgment with all flesh,
and the guilty he will put to the sword,
says the LORD.

32 Thus says the LORD of hosts:

See, disaster is spreading from nation to nation,
and a great tempest is stirring
from the farthest parts of the earth!

33 Those slain by the LORD on that day shall extend from one end of the earth to the other. They shall not be lamented, or

gathered, or buried; they shall become dung on the surface of the ground.

34 Wail, you shepherds, and cry out;
roll in ashes, you lords of the flock,
for the days of your slaughter have come—and your
dispersions,

and you shall fall like a choice vessel.

35 Flight shall fail the shepherds,
and there shall be no escape for the lords of the flock.

36 Hark! the cry of the shepherds,
and the wail of the lords of the flock!

For the LORD is despoiling their pasture,

37 and the peaceful folds are devastated,
because of the fierce anger of the LORD.

38 Like a lion he has left his covert;
for their land has become a waste
because of the cruel sword,
and because of his fierce anger.

Romans 10:14-21

14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” 16 But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” 17 So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

18 But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for
“Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.”

19 Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,
“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.”

20 Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,

“I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.”

21 But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

DEVOTIONAL

These words from Jeremiah sound gruesome. Jeremiah proclaims God’s wrath against all nations and all people. No one will escape God’s judgment, and complete destruction of the earth is imminent. Is this picture of an angry, merciless, or judgmental God the point of Jeremiah’s prophecy? I doubt it. I believe that here Jeremiah is expressing the pathos of God, who was indescribably hurt by His people’s wrongdoings and was awaiting their repentance. In Romans 10, Paul confirms God’s faithful love even to His “disobedient and contrary people” and emphasizes the need to spread this good news about the love of God through the words of Christ.

What is your own picture of God like? What do you believe it means for your posture and actions toward others? Are God's followers called to judge and exclude, or are we called to proclaim God's love to the ends of the earth and to bring people back to God, who is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps. 145:8)?

Let Christ-followers everywhere remember that God's wrath stems from His love for His own people and is directed toward their repentance and complete union with Him in divine love. For the complete picture of God's love for His people is our salvation through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

PRAYER

God of mercy and forgiveness, we acknowledge that we, at times, take wrong paths and sadden you by our foolish choices. Whenever we succumb to wrong paths, guide us to repent and renew our relationship with you. Help us to bask in your mercy and forgiveness so that as living witnesses we may proclaim your love to the ends of the earth.

THURSDAY, APRIL 11, 2019

The Rev. Brenda Barnes, D.Min. – Reformed Theology '18 (and M.Div. '07) / Pastor, NuValley Presbyterian Church, Rural Valley, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 26:1-24

1 At the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came from the LORD: 2 Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. 3 It may be that they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings. 4 You shall say to them: Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, 5 and to heed the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently — though you have not heeded—6 then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth. 7 The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the LORD. 8 And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, "You shall die! 9 Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, 'This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant'?" And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of

the LORD. 10 When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the LORD and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the LORD. 11 Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, "This man deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears." 12 Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, "It is the LORD who sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. 13 Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you. 14 But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. 15 Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will be bringing innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears." 16 Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, "This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God." 17 And some of the elders of the land arose and said to all the assembled people, 18 "Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts,

Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.'

19 Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah actually put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD change his mind about the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster on ourselves!" 20 There was another man prophesying in the name of the LORD, Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words exactly like those of Jeremiah. 21 And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death; but when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt. 22 Then King Jehoiakim sent Elnathan son of Achbor and men with him to Egypt, 23 and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and threw his dead body into the burial place of the common people. 24 But the hand of Ahikam son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so that he was not given over into the hands of the people to be put to death.

DEVOTIONAL

Jeremiah has no choice—he must speak for God with the message God has given to him. The occasion of Jeremiah's prophecy was probably New Year's Day, when many people were to come to the Temple area to see Jehoiakim crowned

as king. It was a time of crisis for the nation of Judah—a time of political upheaval. The people came to the Temple to find reassurance and protection in the new leadership.

But Jeremiah's words are not words of comfort and peace. Instead, his words stir up the emotions of the princes, the people, the priests, and the false prophets (LXX v. 7, 8, 11, 16). "Amend your ways and your doings," Jeremiah says, with full assurance that the words come from God (v. 13). The princes (officials of the king's court) and the people side with Jeremiah because the words come from God. But the priests and false prophets decide he should be put to death. There is an impasse: two groups against two other groups—and Jeremiah, standing in their midst with confidence and power. Let us take note of the bold action of God's faithful, namely, when leadership was found lacking, the people stepped up to voice what they knew to be God's righteous way.

PRAYER

Lord God, help our leaders to recognize you in all the ways they lead us. Help us to amend our ways. Give us voice to call out injustice and remind others of your word. For the sake of Christ we pray. Amen.

FRIDAY, APRIL 12, 2019

The Rev. Marty Neal, M.Div. '18 / Pastor, Appleby Manor Memorial Presbyterian and Crooked Creek Presbyterian Churches, Ford City, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 29:1-14

1 These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 2 This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. 3 The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: 4 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. 8 For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God

of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, 9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. 10 For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. 12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, 14 I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

DEVOTIONAL

Jeremiah's letter is written to a people who are lost, bewildered, and far from their home and their God. They are searching for guidance and answers. False prophets are telling them that their stay in Babylon will be short. The true word from God is that the people should settle in for the long haul. They are to make Babylon their new home. They are to seek God and pray for peace. But what kind of peace?

It seems the people of Israel have prayed for their own peace, as they do in Psalm 122. Now God, through Jeremiah, calls for the people to change their world view. Their shalom, their peace, rests not within themselves but through the world around them. They will find God not in seeking only their peace, but in seeking the peace of Babylon. They will find their peace in the welfare of the non-Israelite, the outsider—their oppressor. And so they will find God.

In a similar sense, Jesus attains his great shalom by offering forgiveness to all—even to those seeking his crucifixion. He invites everyone into the kingdom of God. During this Lenten season, pray for the capacity to love and forgive all others—both within and outside the Church. Pray for their shalom, and so seek God. May we approach Easter with hearts full of love and forgiveness not only for those we love, but also for those who oppress us.

PRAYER

Loving Father, we live in a world with many defined boundaries. We view people on opposite sides of those boundaries as our enemies, our oppressors. Purge our feelings of hate, enmity, and bitterness, and replace them with humility, patience, understanding, strength, and courage. In our difficult world, help us to live with your eyes and your heart in the sure knowledge of our future hope in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 13, 2019

Joanne Spence, M.A. '18 / Director of Therapeutic Yoga, Urban Oasis Pittsburgh / Executive Director, Yoga in Schools / Private-practice Yoga therapist, civilian care and VA Health System, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 149

- 1 Praise the Lord!
Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
- 2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
- 3 Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.
- 4 For the Lord takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with victory.
- 5 Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.
- 6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
- 7 to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
- 8 to bind their kings with fetters
and their nobles with chains of iron,
- 9 to execute on them the judgment decreed.
This is glory for all his faithful ones.
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

The poems in the Psalter reflect the gamut of human emotions in their expressions of crying out to God for forgiveness and mercy, lamenting pain and our own sinfulness, praising God's majestic nature and all his creation, and much more. Psalm 149, the compendium's penultimate song, invites us to praise the Lord in a "new song." Verse 3 tells us to "praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre"—in other words, to praise God with our whole body. Thus Psalm 149 acknowledges our humanity.

For many of us, Lent is a time when we think of our bodies often—particularly if we are practicing daily fasting from food. At such times, we become more aware of our body's limits and needs. Being human is part of how God created us. He made us in his image, yet human, and he declared us good. How often do we exist disconnected from and disappointed with our bodies? A friend and mentor of mine notes, "We don't just have bodies, we are bodies." The body is the primary and only vessel in which to live one's life. We are not "brains-on-a-stick." Could acknowledging our finite and limited existence be the point at which we find true freedom to "sing a new song"—sing it in just the same way the psalmist charges us to praise and thus please the Lord?

PRAYER

Lord, we are yours, and you are ours. Help us to sing a new song. Let us worship you with the entirety of our bodies, thus bearing witness to the Incarnated One. We pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 2019

Ciera (Cici) James / Secretary, PTS Student Association

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 42

- 1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
- 3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
- 4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
- 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
- 7 Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.
- 8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"
- 10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
- 11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

As we walk through this season of Lent we are reminded of our need for God. In our penitence we are reminded not only of God's faithfulness but also of our dependence on God. Yet sometimes we feel alone—sometimes as we face our struggles God seems absent. They ask, "Where is your God?" We cry out in despair from yearning to feel the presence of the Lord again, from knowing our need for our rock. We ask ourselves, "Where is my God?" In our longing, we know God is constant. In our anguish, we know the day will come when we will again rejoice in the Lord. "Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God." Our souls long for healing, peace, and comfort from the Lord—our rock in our distress. Because we know, in truth, that a time is coming when we will again praise the Lord, we can have hope in God even in the midst of our despair.

PRAYER

Lord, you are our rock. You are our foundation in times of darkness, and we know we can trust in you. Yet sometimes we cannot feel your presence. Give us strength to praise you and hope in you when we do not have the strength on our own. Meet us in our despair, gracious God, and hear us when we cry out. You are the one our souls long for. We praise and pray to you now in your Holy name. Amen.

MONDAY, APRIL 15, 2019

Fr. Jim D. King, D.Min., Eastern Christian Focus '18 / Pastor of Youth and Outreach Ministry, Antiochian Orthodox Basilica of St. Mary, Livonia, Mich.

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 3:1-14

1 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. 2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—4 even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having

a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

DEVOTIONAL

In his letter to the church at Philippi, the Apostle Paul reminds the early Christians there to not lose sight of their ultimate goal as members of Christ's Holy Church. Through his own personal example, Paul implores them to stay strong in their conviction as a community and to never lose sight of their ultimate reward. "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 14).

Lent is a wonderful time for us Christians to reflect on that goal by paying particular attention to our spiritual lives and by making adjustments to it where needed. It is a time to build or re-establish the spiritual habits we should be exercising all the time as a Christian community. Most importantly, it is a time to participate in the activities that enable us to stay focused on seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. For according to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, seeking the Kingdom of God is what we are called to do above all else (Matt. 6:33).

This year, may Lent be for all of us a time of spiritual contemplation, renewal, refreshment, and strength as we "press on" and build up within ourselves the virtues that will guide our lives as together we seek God's Heavenly Kingdom and His righteousness.

PRAYER

Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of laziness, despair, greed, and gossip. But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to thy servant. Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother, for You are blessed unto the ages of ages. Amen.

TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 2019

The Rev. Joshua Fisher, Church Planting and Revitalization Certificate '18 (and M.Div. '14) / Co-Pastor, Lincoln Place Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 15:10-21

10 Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me. 11 The LORD said: Surely I have intervened in your life for good, surely I have imposed enemies on you in a time of trouble and in a time of distress. 12 Can iron and bronze break iron from the north? 13 Your wealth and your treasures I will give as plunder, without price, for all your sins, throughout all your territory. 14 I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn for ever.

15 O LORD, you know;
remember me and visit me,
and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors.

In your forbearance do not take me away;
know that on your account I suffer insult.

16 Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I am called by your name,
O LORD, God of hosts.

17 I did not sit in the company of merry-makers,
nor did I rejoice;
under the weight of your hand I sat alone,
for you had filled me with indignation.

18 Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail.

19 Therefore, thus says the LORD:
If you turn back, I will take you back,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall serve as my mouth.
It is they who will turn to you,
not you who will turn to them.

20 And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you,
says the LORD.

21 I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

DEVOTIONAL

In this passage of Scripture we look into the window of Jeremiah's heart and see the suffering that is defining his life. Like a sharp stomach cramp, the suffering of Jeremiah demands our attention, as he begins his lament by saying, "Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me," and as, crippled with rejection, he cries, "all of them curse me." Yet God reminds Jeremiah that rejection, curses, and suffering will not have the last word. God has "intervened for the good" (v. 11).

In this season of Lent, we are preparing ourselves to remember God's intervention for our good. Throughout the history of the church, many Christians have prepared themselves through the ancient practices of fasting and repentance, among others. But to many of us, those particular practices can be intrusive. Perhaps what is most intrusive about fasting and repentance is their invitation to be attentive to and honest about the pain of our own hearts.

It takes great courage to open our places of pain before the Lord, and in Lent we are invited to do just that. Like Jeremiah experienced with God, we are invited to sit down at the table with the True Suffering Servant, Jesus, who offers us the bread and cup of healing—for the deepest wounds can never be healed with bandages, as Jeremiah knew well (v. 18). They can, however, rest safely entrusted in the scar-bearing hands of the One who knows our suffering, the One who says, "I am with you, to save you and deliver you."

PRAYER

Loving Lord, you know the many wellsprings of each of our hearts. The springs of joy and hope. The springs of grace and mercy. The springs of life. You also know the deep wells of pain that we would much rather ignore than address. In this season of Lent, please be gentle with us; at the same time, do not let our fear hold us in bondage any longer. Please give us the courage, trust, and grace to open the wounds you desire to heal and to be patient when healing comes slowly. May you make your Church a bronze wall that will not be moved. To the Glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forevermore, amen.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17, 2019

Robert V. Ellson, M.Div. '18 / Pastor, The United Methodist Church of Mt. Pleasant, Mt. Pleasant, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 12:27-36

27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have

come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. 34 The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" 35 Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

DEVOTIONAL

There is one question that is truly the "bottom-line" question of Easter. It is the question Jesus asked at Bethany when, after proclaiming that He was the resurrection and the life and that those who believed and put their trust in him would have eternal life, he said, "Do you believe this?"

The resurrection is what separates our Lord from the thousands of gurus and prophets who've come both before and after him. Easter's bottom-line question drives responsible hearers either to accept or reject the Christian faith. In an earlier passage (John 11:25-26), the Lord stands at the tomb of his friend Lazarus and makes the astonishing claim, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." Then he looks into their faces and asks the bottom-line question of Easter: "Do you believe this?" It is a question that many of us may not have really stopped to consider. Or perhaps we have actively avoided the question.

"Do you believe this?" Have you transferred your trust from yourself and your own good intentions over to Jesus Christ alone? Has this saving faith, this resurrected life, this "Christ in me" experience made a difference in your life? Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." When he used that phrase, "I Am," it captured the attention of those around him. When our Lord made this statement at the tomb of Lazarus, all those around him recognized it as an affirmation of his deity. Do you believe this?

Do you believe that Jesus is Lord, that you will one day die, and that if you put your trust and faith in him alone you will inherit eternal life? That's it. It's personal. Do you believe—really believe—that Jesus Christ is the risen Savior? The Lord makes it very plain: Eternal salvation is through faith in him alone and not through human effort or good works,

or through any other self-proclaimed prophet or messiah. Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus say, "I am one way, but there will be others." He says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

When asked the question by Jesus, "Do you believe this?" will you be able to answer as Martha did, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is come into the world"? Will you join her this Easter by saying "Yes, Lord . . . I believe!"?

PRAYER

Yes Lord, we believe. We believe you are the Son of God, the risen Lord. We believe your hand will touch the dry bones of our faith, your Word will breathe new life where there was death, your Spirit will raise us up from where we lie, your love will bring us home. And we believe that by your cross and by your grace we stand forgiven, free. Yes Lord, we believe.

THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 2019

Joel Peterson, M.Div. '18 / Pastor, Eldersville United Methodist Church, Burgettstown, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 20:7-18

- 7 O LORD, you have enticed me,
and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day long;
everyone mocks me.
- 8 For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
- 9 If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.
- 10 For I hear many whispering:
"Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"
All my close friends
are watching for me to stumble.
"Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him."
- 11 But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail.

They will be greatly shamed,
 for they will not succeed.
 Their eternal dishonor
 will never be forgotten.

12 O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous,
 you see the heart and the mind;
 let me see your retribution upon them,
 for to you I have committed my cause.

13 Sing to the LORD;
 praise the LORD!
 For he has delivered the life of the needy
 from the hands of evildoers.

14 Cursed be the day
 on which I was born!
 The day when my mother bore me,
 let it not be blessed!

15 Cursed be the man
 who brought the news to my father, saying,
 "A child is born to you, a son,"
 making him very glad.

16 Let that man be like the cities
 that the LORD overthrew without pity;
 let him hear a cry in the morning
 and an alarm at noon,

17 because he did not kill me in the womb;
 so my mother would have been my grave,
 and her womb forever great.

18 Why did I come forth from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame?

DEVOTIONAL

God's call upon the lives of the prophets didn't come with the promise of peace and prosperity or the guarantee that anyone would want to listen to their words. And Jeremiah wasn't afraid to be honest with God about the inhospitable working conditions he endured. The word of God had taken over his body so that the prophetic warning of violence and destruction was always on his lips. Jeremiah wanted to stop preaching, but the words were like a fire that could not be contained. As others heard Jeremiah's prophecy of doom and gloom, the words burned up his reputation and destroyed his body.

No matter our specific vocation, we know from experience that the call of God compels us to diverge from the path of least resistance. As the love of God fills our bodies, we can no longer be silent to the forces of death and unrighteousness in our world. We become disillusioned with the way things are, and a passion to make things right ignites within us. Sometimes we encounter outside resistance, but prophetic voices often encounter more painful resistance from within the Christian community.

There is no more appropriate time than Lent to confess our struggles to God honestly. When we hold these feelings in, we risk burnout. But when we, like Jeremiah, are blunt with

God, the weight of the message's efficacy is lifted from our shoulders. We're reminded that we are vessels of God's word. The word itself and the work of transformation are God's.

PRAYER

Out of the depths we cry to you, O Lord. You have placed causes and concerns deep in our hearts, yet the world has told us to be silent. As your prophetic word burns inside us, give us also your words of grace. Renew us, strengthen us, and equip us to be your servants, now and to the end of the age. Teach us once again to sing your praises, all the while knowing that you will succeed in bringing justice and righteousness to our world. Amen.

FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 2019

The Rev. Dr. John Welch '02, Vice President for Student Services and Community Engagement and Dean of Students, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary / Minister of Music, Bidwell Street United Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

John 13:36-38

36 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." 37 Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." 38 Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times."

DEVOTIONAL

In reflecting on our Christian journey, is it possible to ask whether or not our zeal has created a falsehood that to the eyes of the uninformed and unsaved could easily be interpreted as hypocritical? Is it possible that the words of our mouths and the mediations of our hearts are out of sync and not in proper alignment? As with the Pharisees, whom Jesus chided with the words, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34 et al.), can it be that we suffer from a spiritual form of heart arrhythmia? The words of a famous hymn state, "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back." With fervor and excitement we sing these words without knowing to what extent our faith will be tested.

In John 13:37, Peter unknowingly tells Jesus a modest falsehood, "a fib," because his heart is suffering from a form of spiritual "AFib" (atrial fibrillation), which happens when the heart is in an unhealthy rhythm. A spiritually unhealthy rhythm of the heart can lead to spoken intentions that are shallow and short on follow-through. Peter was affected

by this condition and Jesus diagnosed it. Peter's heart was moving too quickly and was therefore out of step. While Peter, in his zeal and affection, wasn't aware that his faith had not yet been tested and his heart was still unhealthy, Jesus knew what was coming. He warned Peter that his heart would undergo a shock when he'd soon deny the Lord three times.

So also we, in our haste to want to say and do the right things in the company of others, may find ourselves out of step because our fleshly desires put our hearts out of rhythm.

PRAYER

Most Holy God, You, who established truth, diagnosed the sinful condition of the world in eternity past and even now—You are able to diagnose the sinful condition of our hearts. Search us and know our hearts, try us and know our anxieties, and when we are apt to fall short of the holiness you require, lead us in the way everlasting. In the name of Jesus, Your Son and our Savior, amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 2019

The Rev. Carolyn Cranston '99, Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary / Co-pastor, Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Romans 8:1-11

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

DEVOTIONAL

Temptation easily lures us into setting our minds on “things of the flesh,” things that are worldly, the baser things in life that cause us to act according to our sinful nature. And creatures of a sinful nature, even living under the Law, cannot be reconciled to a right relationship with God.

But thanks be to God that, out of love, God made a way for reconciliation—a way to establish an intimate relationship between God and humanity through Jesus Christ, the divine and sinless Son of God, who defeated sin and death and who invites us to share in new life with him. Not through our works but through our faith in Christ Jesus and the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, whom we invite to live in our hearts, we become transformed through the grace—the ill-deserved favor—of God. And so we are placed on the road of living a resurrected life with Christ.

In Christ there is no condemnation because there God has restored us to the right relationship we cannot achieve on our own. There the demands of God's holy nature are achieved on our behalf through the gracious gift God has already given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior. To God be all honor and glory!

PRAYER

Holy and most faithful God, we thank you for your grace and for the gift of your Son, Jesus. Help us turn away from the worldly life of sin and turn instead to Christ Jesus, so that your Spirit may dwell in us to give us life and peace. Thank you that, in Christ, we do not stand condemned. Thank you for your love and forgiveness which restore us to righteousness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 2019

The Rev. Joseph Hedden Jr. '97, President, Alumnae/i Council, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary / Pastor, Emmanuel Reformed (Hill's) Church of the United Church of Christ, Export, Pa.

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 51:9-11

9 Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of the Lord!
Awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago!
Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
who pierced the dragon?
10 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a way
for the redeemed to cross over?

11 So the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

The Scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

DEVOTIONAL

For those of us who have learned to pray carefully crafted petitions, the rawness of the prophet's appeal is shocking. Throwing out courtesy and convention, the prophet pleads with the Lord to awaken! To act! To rescue! To save! The unspoken implication is that, throughout the awful night of the Babylonian exile and trouble, the Lord has been asleep.

Yes, in bygone days the Lord did act in mighty ways at the Red Sea. But today? "Awake, Lord, Awake!" Surrounded by lilies, a full choir, and Easter joy, can any of us imagine begging the Lord to wake up as the pastor approaches the pulpit to lead worship? Surely we preachers will want to move on quickly to verse 11 and its future day and future hope.

But not so fast. Perhaps the prophet is struggling to identify and name a reality deep within the human soul. There are times when we live in the shadow of the cross—and not the triumphant and gleaming bronze cross of the Easter sanctuary but, rather, Calvary's wooden cross of injustice, pain, and death. We know moments when words cleave to the tongue and all we can ask the Lord is, "Where are you?" The prophet's appeal to the Lord may not be pretty, but it is real. "Awake, awake, arm of the Lord" is the unadorned prayer of struggle clawing toward hope. It is the prayer we pray at bedsides and late at night in the half-empty Intensive Care lounge. "Awake, arm of the Lord" is the doubtful prayer of faith and the faithful prayer of doubt. Perhaps "Awake, arm of the Lord" is the appropriate prayer of sorrow and loss on a dark and misty pre-dawn journey to a tomb in Jerusalem—a journey at the end of which we discover that the Lord is, indeed, awake!

PRAYER

Awake, arm of the Lord! We remember your deeds of love and grace and ask you to make them real to us today. See us here in our struggles; our wrestling with doubt, our passion for justice, and our search for healing. May you provide the words and memories when they fail us. May your strong arm remind us of the hope of the empty tomb, which turns our world on its head. We pray in the name of the resurrected Christ. Amen.

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